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ABSTRACT

Case studies have typically been weakened by the conflict between two promises that are usually made to subjects being interviewed: (1) that the focus of the evaluation is the program, not the interviewee; and (2) that the interview is an opportunity for the subject to defend his or her practice to those who seek to judge it. These promises commit the evaluator to a conservative and insufficiently evaluative stance. In addition, traditional interviewing techniques do not serve the evaluative function. These improvements are suggested: (1) use a tape recorder for recording interview data, rather than a notebook; (2) concentrate upon the interviewee as a person rather than as a role incumbent; and (3) make it clear to the interviewee that the evaluative process is a shared task. (BW)

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INTERVIEWING IN CASE STUDY EVALUATION *

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INTRODUCTION

This time last year, in Boston, much of the AERA meeting was preoccupied with the various forms of naturalistic enquiry that constitute the breakaway tradition in educational research and evaluation of the last decade. But not critically preoccupied, for the most part. The recruitment drive was still on, the advocates of literacy and holism still beating the mathematicians and compartmentalists about the head with a zeal unqualified by the onset of self doubt. But here and there a note of dissent from within the ranks. Harry Walcott went to Boston to rescue 'ethnography' from the plunderings of what he saw as a raggle taggle army of ill-disciplined adventurers. He was promptly reprimanded from the floor by Bob Stake, doyen of the movement, who told Harry he was talking like a trade unionist. I found this interchange particularly thought provoking. Live and let die for the opposition, live and let live for the allies? What price is paid for a united front, and who pays it?

In England next month, at a conference sponsored by the British equivalent of AERA, tutors of research degree students will seek to address the problems of guidance and assessment posed by their growing preference for naturalistic enquiry. For some tutors have been heard to complain that these students reject as inappropriate the traditional canons of research design, while impatient tutees have counter-claimed that they are yoked to obsolete icons of investigation. It seems that recruitment to the movement has passed the point where apprenticeship to experienced practitioners can meet the demand for opportunity and initiation. If we are not simply to concede the

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pedagogical territory to the kind of thinly grounded cookbook of advice that is now beginning to feature in the literature, or to leave students and tutors to flounder within the ample latitudes of our persuasive but highly generalised paradigms, then we must put aside the soapbox and make more accessible to others the kind of issue centred view of our work that we readily share with intimates.

My paper is offered in this spirit. Its context is a nexus of issues, some of them political, some ethical, some technical, which divide practitioners of naturalistic enquiry. My field is evaluation, my form of naturalistic enquiry travels under the label of case study. In what follows I am concerned to examine and respond to a persistent criticism of the practice which I, and others of like mind, have evolved over the years in response to the opportunities and problems generated by evaluative inquiry. The criticism states simply that this particular approach to case study evaluation, designed as an instrument of review and change, in effect protects and conserves educational practice. This criticism is levelled, not by those who are hostile to naturalistic enquiry, but by practitioners who bring to bear upon such studies a different set of political,ethical, and technical convictions.

In American terms the dispute could be described as a disagreement between the radical and the liberal wings of case study evaluation, although it is neither as confined nor as polarised as such a division suggests. The radicals, who appear to me at least to use case study to flesh out an a priori analysis of structure and function (at best this can be seen as a hypothetico-deductive approach, at worst as an Alice in Wonderland trial) are particularly hostile to two features that have been cornerstones of my 'liberal' practice. The first is the application of a well-worked set of procedures designed to protect subjects from investigative abuse by establishing rights to personal privacy and a considerable degree of control by subjects over the content and use of evaluation reports. The second is an approach to case study that emphasises the collection and

articulation of diverse perspectives of educational practice without requiring the evaluator to adjudicate between them. The critics seize upon these features as a sure recipe for protectionism and inertia, whereas I have stoutly defended them as guarantees of fairness, validity and, more pragmatically, of the survival of case study as a marketable form of inquiry.

But I have been troubled by the charge which, it is fair to say, has also been made by colleagues of far from radical persuasion, and this has led me to initiate a review of my own, and like practice. In the remainder of this paper I reconsider that practice, and offer some notes towards its reconstruction. In so doing I have chosen to focus upon interviewing, for reasons which I hope will become self-evident.

Interviewing in Case Study Evaluation

As evaluators we are usually pushed for time and resources, and these constraints are largely responsible for the peculiar features of the evolving tradition of case study in evaluation. We can't afford the kind of lengthy immersion in programme action sites that has characterised and shaped other ethnographic traditions. We go for condensed fieldwork, short sharp bursts of data gathering leading to negotiable accounts of social action in situ. Negotiation is crucial, not just because the constraints entail problems of validity and adequacy, but because our reports may damage the interests of those whose work we represent. The context is evaluative, the intent (ours or someone else's) to judge. The combination of logistic limitations and threatening purpose makes for heavy methodological reliance upon interviewing as the principal mode of data gathering. Compared with observations, interviews are easier to obtain, easier to do, easier to process and easier to negotiate.

But the use of the interview exacerbates a problem that is in any case a worrying feature of case study evaluations, the tendency of such studies to be over-protective of the institutions and practices of which judgement is required. Case study is a social process, imposing upon its users the social obligations of a guest.

Interviewing is even more demanding, since it brings into play the values and expectations associated with interpersonal relationships. Few of us would deny that, in seeking access to the case and in cultivating the cooperation of its residents we de-emphasise the evaluative purpose and exploit whatever personal qualities we can muster in order to "sell" our presence and so make good our mission.

This brings me close to my point . The difficulties of negotiating and maintaining the cooperation of the residents, reinforced by our natural reluctance to engage in ad hominem evaluation, involve us in two (usually implicit) promises to the interviewee, both designed to ease our path by making him feel more comfortable. The first is that we have not come to evaluate him, but to evaluate the activities in which he is engaged and for which many others share responsibility. So far so good - we do not see ourselves surely as the hounds of individual retribution. It is the second "promise" that makes the keeping of the first fatally undermining to our mission. We make it clear that the interview is an opportunity for him to defend his practice to those who seek to judge it. We are his agents, his means of representation to the outside world.

There is a lot ot be said for these promises. Our audiences are almost always more interested in the strengths and weaknesses of the programme than they are in the performances of thos- employed by them. And the people in the case have a right to be heard and a right to defend what they do and how they do it. But, and it is a considerable 'but', we commit ourselves and our interviewees to a process of enquiry and reporting that is conservative, not just of persons, but of institutions and practices. Such case studies are insufficiently evaluative to serve the needs of review.

In so far as my argument so far is persuasive enough to merit further exploration, I want to argue further that the evaluative purpose is in any case poorly served by both traditional and contemporary approaches to interviewing, and that any effort to improve the evaluative utility of the case study should start from a reappraisal of interviewing practice and possibilities. My goal is to

reach a conception of the interview that permits the reasonable rights of the interviewee to be met without undermining the evaluation purpose. In my view this calls for effective means of shifting the interviewee from a defensive to an evaluative posture. In other words I see some form of self-evaluation as the alternative to the kind of self-justification that our approaches tend to evoke, and I believe we need to evolve new approaches to the interview in order to achieve this change.

In case study evaluation, there is a need to get away from the kind of role-locked encounter that is fostered by conventional appproaches to interviewing. Such approaches range from the "animate questionnaire", where through a simple stimulus/response process the blanks in a pre-structured form are filled in, to the so-called unstructured interview in which the interviewer continuously processes what he is told and writes his edition in a notebook. In this latter approach the helpful, nervous, or impatient interviewee responds to the processing problem in a number of ways; by being as articulate and succinct as possible, by slowing the pace of his responses to the pace of the writer, by noting and acting upon what stimulates or fails to stimulate the interviewer to write, by adopting conservative assumptions about which of the thoughts that come to him are likely to be relevant and useful, and editing his thoughts accordingly. For his part the interviewer, compelled by the imperative of instant codification to rely upon familiar categories, selects and marshalls the data in response to a matrix in his head.

Inevitably, and despite the best efforts of the interviewee to aid the process of conversion from spoken to written discourse, slippage occurs. Incomplete statements and thoughts get rounded out, complexities of tone and non-verbal communication reduced to single word indices. Case study interviewers who adopt any of these pre-processed or continuous processing approaches to the interview should give some attention to their coiffure, since the interviewee spends a lot of his time contemplating the top of the interviewer's head.

The manifest instrumentality of such encounters limits their power to evoke the personal experience of public life. The concept of the person embodied in such interactions is inescapably a diminished one, at worst a category within a known range, at best a mixed bag of

dross and ore from which the nuggets can readily be extracted. The fact that most people are willing to play such roles simply means that they accept the instrumental purpose but withhold their persons from its probing; their uniqueness, wholeness, mystery, essential unknowability are not at stake. The inherent reductionism of the procedures invites, and usually gets, the immediately negotiable account.

This will do for some case study purposes; we don't always need access to the person behind the account. Much of the time we are usefully gathering data that shows how things look, what people do and what they readily say about what they do. They see us, rightly, as agents (direct or indirect, advertent or inadvertent) of accountability, and this reinforces their common impulse to defend and justify what we see them doing. So the accounts they give us aspire to plausibility and acceptability. Good. We need such accounts - they are expected by our audiences and they reflect the terms by which the case residents agree to be judged or accept they will be understood.

We could therefore, and often do, stop there. We may have done enough to inform people about the case, to reveal some important discrepancies between observation and explanation, to stimulate reflection, to provide a reasonable basis for reviewing roles, goals, resources and rewards. A basis for improvement, rearrangement, modification, amelioration. Seldom, however, a basis for significant change, even though we continue to live in the midst of significant failure. Why so?

We fail in our work to separate persons from practices clearly enough to understand, or enable others to understand, the nature of the compromises that make up our public institutions. In so doing we fail in our primary purpose - to reveal educational possibilities. We have a sense of our own possibilities, an understanding of our own compromises with circumstance, that is rarely matched in our accounts of others.

So much for the problem, What does the solution look like? I have come to the issue too recently to elaborate in any detail an alternative, but my own experience of interviewing, in a style which has evolved over a number of years, may offer some pointers to a way ahead.

First, the technology. Let's get rid of the notebook, for the reasons given. We still need to document though, and my preference is for the unobtrusive tape recorder, for reasons which are important to the development of the interviewee as evaluator. It allows me to listen to everything that's said, to observe the whole communication continuously, to pick up non-verbal clues, interpreting pauses for instance rather grasping the opportunity they afford to make notes, to respond facially rather than verbally, to post edit and categorise, and above all to develop a person to person dynamic.

Secondly, let us concentrate upon the interviewee as a person rather than as a role incumbent, and use the interview as a means to explore the relationship between people and the jobs they happen to be doing. Rob Walker and I once ran a weekend conference for young teachers on the theme "To what extent is the person you are the teacher you are?". The result was an astonishingly penetrative evaluation by the participants of their own institutions and practices. This question could and should, in my view, be the basis of a much more personalised approach to interviewing in which the person being interviewed is invited and encouraged to take an "outsider's" view of his professional situation and subject it to evaluative scrutiny. Lawrence Stenhouse has argued that the only ideas one can objectively evaluate are one's own, and this provocative statement could be put to the test in an interview which continuously focusses on the interface between persons and their professional roles.

Finally, let us be careful when we are negotiating access to the people in the case, that we communicate clearly this concept of a shared task in the evaluative process. Let us say to them that we assume that all social action is a compromise of some kind between values, interests and circumstances, and that our task, and theirs, is not to defend or attack that compromise but to understand its precise structure. This is not a promise, but an invitation to locate the evaluative act where the action is. I think this may be a way forward. It offers the possibility of achieving more evaluative purchase upon our institutions and practices without sacrificing the aspirations to validity and fairness that have, and should continue to shape and constrain our freedom of action.